

# Arms and the man in *Aeneid* 12

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The very first line of the *Aeneid*, ‘I sing of arms and the man...’, promises a poem with a dual focus: this epic will be the personal story of one man, Aeneas, but it will also be a war-poem, a narrative on the grand scale. Both elements will combine to bring us to the goal of the epic: the foundation of the Roman race. But how does the final book of the *Aeneid* deal with these two thematic strands? How does the representation of Aeneas as an individual engage with so vast a theme as the destiny and history of Rome?

## Arms and the Man

Epic, by its very nature, is big, and the *Aeneid* is no exception. Any war-epic worth its salt narrates mass conflict, encompassing within its limits vast swathes of space and time, but the scope of the *Aeneid* is staggering. In geographical terms, we are transported within one poem all over the place: not just from Troy to Italy, but around the Aegean, Mediterranean, and even as far out as Africa. In temporal terms, the *Aeneid* is even bigger, managing to encompass within itself, by a variety of narrative tricks, a story of the Roman people that reaches all the way from pre-Roman beginnings in Troy, through a humble start as a city and hundreds of years as a Republic, up to Virgil’s own times, the Imperial Rome of Augustus. Audaciously, the poet does not even stop there: rather, he asserts that with Augustus in power the rules of time and space no longer apply; there is just Roman rule without limits, forever (*imperium sine fine*).

One might think that an epic of such dizzying span would necessarily be rather impersonal, but in transmitting the massive weight of Rome’s history through the story of Aeneas, Virgil narrates a personal struggle for survival and success that we can empathize with and follow. Even more remarkably, competing emotions, loves, and desires seem to drive not just the story of Aeneas, but the story of Rome itself: even at its most ‘personal’, the poet of the *Aeneid* ‘connects’ Aeneas up with the bigger picture, the future of Rome. Focusing on two, very different ‘private’ moments in the *Aeneid*, and the emotions that accompany them, we may understand better how ‘arms and the man’ are worked out in the endgame of the text; a close look will show that nothing is ever ‘really’ personal in the *Aeneid*, and that the distinction between individual and state is always (and perhaps deliberately) elusive.

## Arms and the boy: Aeneas and Ascanius

In this epic, Aeneas loses almost everyone dear to him – his wife, Creusa, his father, Anchises, and his great love, Dido. The significant exception is, of course, his son Ascanius, who in pointed contrast to other ‘doomed youths’ survives a pretty risky adolescence, and will go on to found Alba Longa, an important place in Rome’s history. In the second half of the *Aeneid*, Ascanius is often separated from Aeneas; but in the final book, father and son are often seen together again, re-affirming the bond of affection with which the journey of the *Aeneid* began, when they left Troy hand in hand.

A tender moment between father and son in the middle of *Aeneid* 12 re-affirms the importance of this paternal/filial love. After being wounded by an unknown assailant, Aeneas is about to re-enter the battle, but first kisses his son and tells Ascanius

to learn from him courage and hard work; and that he should remember with pride, when he is a man, that his father is Aeneas and his uncle Hector. The kiss and mention of ‘uncle Hector’ offers a snapshot of a private and affectionate family moment. But for readers who know the pre-history of the *Aeneid*, this moment replays a famous episode in the *Iliad* where Hector, champion of Troy, had terrified his infant son Astyanax, when he tried to kiss him while wearing his fear-inspiring helmet. Hector’s boy, the hope of Troy, was killed before he was old enough to recognise his father in armour: this small moment in the *Aeneid*, which replays but reverses that scene, symbolizes a new future in which Trojans will survive to win.

But this scene does not simply suggest that now Troy will triumph. It also orients the reader to the new, distinctly Roman future. For the scene comments on a deep-set theme of the *Aeneid*, the love for family, country, and gods summed up in the term *pietas*; Aeneas furnishes an example not just for Ascanius but for all Romans. This scene, then, offers not just a breathing-space amidst war, or an insight into Aeneas’ relationship with his son: it also marks out a definitive turn towards a new Roman future. Indeed, Aeneas is father not just to Ascanius, but also to the future Roman race, and time and again Ascanius himself is held up as an emblem of the Roman future. The strange double-name of the youth – both Ascanius and Iulus – points to the double nature of the role he plays in this epic, for his Roman name, Iulus, marks his role as founder of another family, the *gens Iulia*, whose most famous member will be Augustus himself. This mini-episode, showcasing Aeneas’ loving protection of his son, does not just capture paternal love: it also encapsulates the foundations on which Rome itself will stand.

## A farewell to arms? Aeneas and Turnus

Aeneas shows paternal love for his son in *Aeneid* 12, but the dominating emotion of the final book is the mad love of Turnus for Lavinia, a passion which provokes needless violence and bloodshed in place of the settled bloodline which will be created in the future union of Lavinia and Aeneas. It may be a rather unromantic fact that the destined marriage of that pair lacks passion, but a closer look at the effects of love in the *Aeneid* confirms that this lack of ‘sizzle’ is probably a good thing, for amorous madness invariably leads to disaster. Earlier in the epic, Aeneas’ passionate relationship with Dido ended with the death of the Queen, a wrecked city, and guaranteed future enmity between Carthage and Rome; in *Aeneid* 12 the hero steers well clear of such dangerous emotions, leaving love-stricken fury and sadness to Turnus. In many respects, *Aeneid* 12 characterizes Aeneas and Turnus as ‘twins’, or ‘mirror-figures’; but their contrasting responses to marriage with Lavinia merely serve to highlight the differences between the two in the text’s endgame. The passion that drives Turnus will bring him to his death: his personal tragedy arises out of his inability to see the ‘bigger picture’, his refusal to accept the greater destiny of Rome.

This all makes for a climactic encounter between Aeneas and Turnus, and in the final moments of the duel, when Turnus is wounded by that thunderbolt of a spear-throw, individual emotion and its consequences for the future Rome are concentrated into one final and intense scene. Strikingly, the two different emotional pulls of the *Aeneid* – ‘good’ paternal love, and ‘bad’ passionate love – come together once again here, with

unexpected results. The selfish individual Turnus changes tack, begging Aeneas for mercy in the name of both their fathers and relinquishing his claim to Lavinia; in other words, making an appeal that hits at the key emotions that have underpinned Aeneas' other individual choices in this book, respect for family, and alliance through union with Lavinia rather than continued warfare. But here too everything changes for Aeneas, for it is at this point that Aeneas catches sight of the belt of Pallas, spoils belonging to a young man who was almost a son to Aeneas, and disrespectfully taken by Turnus earlier in the epic. This recognition provokes a crisis, as one set of emotional values comes into collision with another: both Pallas' belt and Turnus' words play on Aeneas' commitment to the importance of the father-son bond, but both demand different outcomes. In the event, it seems that Aeneas makes no active choice at all: overcome by mad passion, he slaughters Turnus.

### **The end – or the beginning?**

Are Aeneas' actions justified, or does his adoption of disturbingly Turnus-like behaviour here undermine the 'proper' emotions he has demonstrated throughout the rest of *Aeneid* 12? Each reader must make up his own mind. In the end, Virgil offers no easy way out of the *Aeneid*, for characters within the epic and readers outside it. But it is an inescapable fact that this private, personal, and passionate act of vengeance has an obvious consequence for the Roman future. For when Aeneas kills Turnus, Virgil employs a verb, *condere*, which means not just 'to stab', but also 'to found'. When Aeneas puts Turnus to the sword, he sets in motion the foundation of the Roman race. Overcome by passion, Aeneas performs the definitive act that the individual and broad-scale focus of the *Aeneid* has been working towards: the literal and figurative foundation of Rome.

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